

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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Secretary Clinton Meets With Syrian Opposition Activists

By Stephen Kaufman | Staff Writer

Washington — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton met with a group of Syrian activists and members of the Syrian-American community in Washington to show support for Syrian demonstrators as well as sympathy for the victims of their government's abuses.

State Department spokesman Mark Toner said August 2 that during the meeting Clinton conveyed her "admiration for the courage of the brave Syrian people who continue to defy the government's brutality in order to express their universal rights."

Syrians have been protesting against Bashar al-Assad's regime since March, calling for political and economic reforms. The Syrian government has responded with violence to the demonstrations occurring across the country, most recently killing nearly 100 civilians in the central city of Hama July 31 and August 1, according to press reports. Human rights groups have said that nearly 1,500 people have been killed since the beginning of the protest movement.

In an August 1 statement, Clinton condemned the "brutality and viciousness" of the Assad regime's latest attacks on civilians, which coincided with the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, and called upon the Syrian leader to "stop the slaughter now."

She said Assad "has lost his legitimacy with the Syrian people," and his actions are helping to ensure that "he and his regime will be left in the past."

"Syria will be a better place when a democratic transition goes forward," Clinton said.

In her meeting with the Syrian activists, the secretary expressed her confidence in "the Syrian people's ability to chart a new course for Syria," Toner said, and the activists articulated a vision for "a representative and inclusive and pluralistic Syrian government that respects the rights of all Syrian citizens."

Toner said the Syrian opposition is evolving and is coming together despite the pressure from the Assad regime.

"What we're seeing in Syria is very much a grass-roots movement, one that has grown in strength and numbers as the Assad regime has carried out its brutal crackdown. And we've said many times that the Syrian government's violence against its people only, I think, serves to strengthen the opposition to his regime," he said.

Toner also said the Obama administration is planning to expand its sanctions against the Assad regime to further isolate it and deny it revenue, and is currently "exploring the scope" of possible measures.

President Obama met with U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford at the White House August 1 and condemned the Syrian government's "outrageous use of violence against its own people," while reaffirming U.S. support for "the courageous Syrian people, and their demands for universal rights and a democratic transition," according to a White House press release.

In a separate July 31 statement, Obama said the recent violence in Hama was "horrifying" and that Assad had again shown that "he is completely incapable and unwilling to respond to the legitimate grievances of the Syrian people."

"His use of torture, corruption and terror puts him on the wrong side of history and his people," the president said, adding that the United States will "continue to increase our pressure on the Syrian regime, and work with others around the world to isolate the Assad government and stand with the Syrian people."

Congress Passes Debt Limit Extension

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr. | Staff Writer

Washington — The U.S. Congress voted to raise the nation's legal borrowing limit by at least \$2.1 trillion and to begin reducing the nation's total debt by at least \$1 trillion in phases over a 10-year period.

President Obama said August 2 at the White House that the actions taken by Congress over the past two days are a first step toward the United States addressing its long-term debt issues.

"Congress has now approved a compromise to reduce the deficit and avert a default that would have devastated our economy," Obama said in brief remarks at the White House August 2. "It's an important first step to ensuring that, as a nation, we live within our means."

By voting for legislation to raise the nation's debt limit of \$14.3 trillion before midnight August 2, the United States staved off a potential default on loan payments, interest payments on U.S. bonds and related federal debts, which would have created economic and financial instability not just in the United States but globally, Obama said. It would also have jeopardized the full faith and credit of the United States.

It remains uncertain if the delay in raising the debt limit may cause commercial bond rating agencies to lower the nation's AAA credit rating, which could make borrowing

more costly by raising the interest rates paid on U.S. debt. World currency markets were watching Congress because the U.S. dollar acts as a global reserve currency underpinning the 24-hour-a-day foreign exchange market that links to the flow of global investments.

World financial markets had responded favorably to the news July 31 when Obama announced that an agreement had been reached among the senior leadership of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives to raise the debt limit and to begin the difficult process of reducing the federal debt.

Obama told reporters late July 31 that a default would have also affected the economic recovery from the 2007–2009 recession, which was the second steepest in U.S. history after the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The United States has never failed to raise its borrowing limit or defaulted on its obligations, according to the U.S. Congressional Research Service.

According to the White House, the president is authorized in this legislation to increase the debt limit by at least \$2.1 trillion through the remainder of this year and 2012, to avoid a similar debate in Congress during a general election year.

The U.S. House of Representatives voted August 1 by a vote of 269 to 161 to raise the debt limit by approximately \$2.1 trillion. On August 2, the U.S. Senate voted 74 to 26 to raise the debt limit. The president signed the measure into law shortly after the Senate vote.

DEBT LIMIT REACHED

On May 16, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner announced that the federal debt had reached its statutory limit. The Treasury Department then began a series of extraordinary measures to extend U.S. borrowing capacity until approximately August 2, when its borrowing authority was exhausted.

Standard methods of paying for federal government operations or meeting government obligations used by the Treasury can be limited as the federal debt reaches its legal limit, a July Congressional Research Service (CRS) report said. Expenses and revenue fluctuate over the course of a federal year, which runs from October 1 to September 30, regardless of whether the government has a surplus or deficit for the entire year.

“The ability to borrow is central to Treasury cash management systems that handle fluctuations in federal revenues and outlays,” the CRS report said. “Treasury has yet to face a situation in which it was unable to pay its obligations as a result of reaching the debt limit. In the

past, the debt limit has always been raised before the debt reached the limit.”

In addition to Americans who invest in U.S. Treasury securities such as short- and long-term bonds, foreign investors and other nations often buy Treasury securities for their safety as long-term investments. The debate in Washington over raising the debt limit had attracted worldwide attention, though throughout July there was heavy trading in Treasury securities by domestic and international investors, according to news reports.

REDUCING THE DEFICIT

In addition to voting to raise the nation’s debt limit, Congress also voted in the same legislation to enact spending limits over a 10-year period that would generate nearly \$2 trillion in deficit reduction that would be balanced between defense and non-defense federal spending, the White House said. Initially, the legislation begins reducing the federal debt by \$1 trillion over 10 years.

Obama said the legislative compromise to reach this point also allows the United States to keep making key investments in education and scientific research that can lead to new jobs, and assures that the nation is not cutting spending too abruptly while the recovery process continues.

As a second part of the deficit reduction process, a congressional committee is being formed to find an additional \$1.5 trillion in deficit reduction that could include changes to the federal tax laws and reductions in entitlement programs such as Social Security. The committee will report its findings to Congress in late November, and Congress must vote on those recommendations by late December.

If Congress does not vote for the budget reductions, which would be done in phases, then automatic reductions would begin in 2013.

The Congress chose to begin the budget reductions in 2013, after the United States holds general elections in November 2012 for president, the House of Representatives and a third of the Senate.

U.S. Reassures Aid Agencies Providing Relief in Somalia

By Stephen Kaufman | Staff Writer

Washington — Because of the compelling humanitarian crisis in the Horn of Africa, including southern Somalia, the Obama administration is reassuring nongovernmental organizations and aid groups that they will not risk prosecution if their efforts to aid famine victims violate

U.S. sanctions on the terrorist group al-Shabaab.

Speaking to reporters in an August 2 conference call from Washington, senior administration officials said that despite the possibility that al-Shabaab could divert or profit from food and medical assistance in areas under their control, the primary concern of the United States is to save lives, and it wants relief workers to feel they have the flexibility to move aid to wherever it is needed most.

Nearly 12 million people living primarily in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Djibouti need urgent food and medical assistance because of drought conditions, and Somalia is among the hardest hit because of an ongoing civil war and the difficulty of aid groups to gain access to areas controlled by al-Shabaab, which the officials said are the worst-affected areas.

In southern Somalia, there are 1.2 million children at risk, and 600,000 of them are severely malnourished and need emergency medical attention.

"This is just such a compelling crisis that I think we are deciding that it's worth running the risk of some diversion. We'll do everything we can to avoid that, but the humanitarian need is compelling," an official said.

In April 2010, President Obama issued an executive order prohibiting Americans and U.S. NGOs from providing any kind of assistance to terrorist organizations and armed groups inside Somalia, including al-Shabaab, in order to prevent them from profiting from it. However, the U.S. government has not prevented the provision of assistance to those in need in Somalia, and the Obama administration has given \$80 million to aid the Somali people in response to the current crisis.

The official said the restrictions and the concerns that aid could be diverted to al-Shabaab may have caused some humanitarian assistance organizations to feel constrained in their response to the emergency in Somalia.

"We're trying to help them not feel constrained and trying to help them move the food to where it's most desperately needed," the official said. "In essence, what we're doing here is working to reassure humanitarian assistance organizations and workers that good faith efforts to deliver food to people in need will not risk prosecution."

Southern Somalia is "one of the most insecure operating environments on the globe" for relief organizations, a second official said. Al-Shabaab has imposed taxes, tolls and restrictions on aid workers, and 14 World Food Programme employees have died in areas under al-Shabaab's control since 2008. The terrorist group banned humanitarian organizations in 2009, and many aid organizations were forced to suspend their operations.

But the administration official said some elements of al-Shabaab have been willing to allow aid organizations to provide the Somali people with relief supplies, and the United States wants to give those organizations "the flexibility and all the possible ways in which that assistance can be provided."

"We don't expect there to be a grand bargain where there's unfettered assistance throughout south Somalia, but we do believe that there are very concerned leaders on the ground who will enable the kind of assistance that will save lives," the official said.

U.S. Firms Sprang into Action to Save Chilean Miners

By Andrzej Zwanecki | Staff Writer

Washington — On August 22, 2010, when 33 miners were found alive, trapped 700 meters below the surface by a major collapse in the San José mine in Chile, a thought flashed in Brandon Fisher's mind: The drilling company he headed, Center Rock Inc., could help.

Meanwhile, the rescue operation headed by Chilean Minister of Mines Laurence Golborne began working on a plan to drill through solid rock to make a shaft large enough to pull the miners to the surface. Fisher and Center Rock's distributor in Chile, Drillers Supply S.A., sent a message to the Chilean operation: With its technology, Center Rock could help cut drilling time by half.

Once the offer was accepted, Roberto Matus, deputy chief of mission at the Chilean Embassy in Washington, asked United Parcel Service Inc. (UPS), a package-delivery company with headquarters in Atlanta, to transport Center Rock drills from Berlin, Pennsylvania, to the San José mine near Copiapó. UPS did it, quickly and free. Fisher, along with his manager, Richard Soppe — both experienced drillers — flew to Chile to join the rescue operation.

Other American businesses already were present at the site. Zephyr Technology Corporation, a small firm based in Annapolis, Maryland, had sent a device that allowed rescuers to monitor the health of the stranded miners. Aramark Corporation, a large Philadelphia-based food and facility services company, was delivering hot meals to the miners underground. A NASA team — two physicians, Michael Duncan and J.D. Polk; a psychologist, Al Holland; and an engineer, Clint Cragg — was there to advise on issues concerning the miners' health.

Codelco, a large Chilean mining corporation, was in charge of the rescue operation. It was splitting its efforts among three simultaneous but different strategies to gain access to the miners, each involving experts and equipment from different countries.

"Even though it seemed competitive, we were always able to work together, helping each other," Fisher said. He and Soppe were part of what was called "Plan B," based on the rig operated by Geotec Boyles Brothers S.A., a joint venture between a Chilean firm and Layne Christensen Company, a U.S. drilling firm.

Two weeks after their arrival, two experienced drillers from Layne Christensen, Jeff Hart and Matt Staffel, joined the Plan B team. They flew to the site in Chile directly from Afghanistan, where they had been drilling water wells for U.S. troops. Hart said that becoming part of the rescue operation was quite a different experience.

"You suddenly realize that there are 33 guys under the ground that need your help," he said. "This put a lot of urgency and stress into the whole scenario."

The goal of each plan — Plans A, B and C — was to drill a shaft large enough for a capsule that would be designed by the Chilean Navy to go down and up, bringing the miners one by one to the surface. When NASA's Cragg returned to Washington, he quickly put together a team of about 20 engineers to speedily work out requirements for the capsule. The team recommended a few dozen design features. The Chilean authorities incorporated most of NASA's suggestions into the final design.

"But make no mistake," Cragg said, Chilean Navy engineers "really did the heavy lifting" because they designed and built the capsule.

On October 9, the Plan B team reached the trapped miners. Zephyr sent its engineer, Ben Morris, from Annapolis to the San José mine with additional equipment to allow doctors to collect medical data on each miner, who would now be hoisted in the capsule. The rescue operation itself started three days later. Miners were brought to the surface one by one in the capsule.

For Morris, the emotions involved were close to his military experience in Iraq, where he had coordinated sniper missions and intelligence operations. In such a situation, "everybody has to know his or her part and do it correctly because people's lives are at stake," he said.

Matus, of the Chilean embassy, said he doesn't know the exact number of U.S. businesses that participated directly in the rescue operation — probably between eight and 12, he estimated. But the number of companies, organizations and people who offered help or served as intermediaries or contact points was greater. And some firms donated their equipment and services. "I was impressed by [the] solidarity and engagement shown by different parts of U.S. society," he said.

U.S. companies that participated in the operation at the

San José mine are among sponsors of an exhibition on the survival of the miners and the rescue. The exhibition, which opens August 5 at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, will tell the stories of the rescued and the rescuers and feature the rescue capsule, new video footage from the rescue, mementos from the miners, and rock samples from the mine.

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